

RELIGION PHILOSOPHY YOGA

A SELECTION OF ARTICLES

by

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CHAPTER 2

VAIṢṆAVA DEVOTION IN THE TAMIL COUNTRY*

SO FAR SANSKRIT philology and Buddhist studies have dominated Indological research, and this is quite understandable. Sanskrit culture by itself largely dominates the whole of Indian civilisation and is its uniting factor. It is again the same culture which got established in all the regions of India and thanks to its reputation of being a culture of great erudition, formed the crux of the Indian influence in Asia and the Far East. Even when Indian culture expressed itself in languages other than Sanskrit, its principal themes, or at least much of its material, were still provided by Sanskrit literature. Sanskrit is the Latin of Asia beyond Iran. On its part, Buddhism is one of the major religions of the world. Its study is indispensable in relation to Christianity or to Islam, as one of the great universal attempts to exceed the human condition. It is one of the essential factors in the spread of Indian culture and consequently of Indian history. And what interests us is not merely its actual role, and although Indologists must have been justly proud of having discovered this at a time when India herself had forgotten it, but also the nature of its doctrines and its methods that make of it a subject of exceptional interest and study. As it appears today—at least to my mind—Buddhism, more than being a religion, is a psychological discipline like several others India developed through yoga—even though it has given rise, up to this day, to great strictly religious developments. In the 19th century, when Buddhism was discovered, Europe could not reconcile itself to the increased appeal at Buddhism because she had too rudimentary a knowledge of psychology and, particularly, at psychological techniques that Buddhism had come to develop.

*Lecture delivered at the ISMEO at the invitation of Prof. Tucci, then Director of ISMEO and published under the title *La dévotion vishnouite au pays tamoul*, in *conferenze*, ISMEO, Rome, Vol. II, 1954, p. 81-109.

However, I would have certainly responded in a better way to the honour that Professor Tucci has kindly conferred on me by inviting me to address you if I had come to this important centre of Buddhist studies to share with you some reflections on a subject that is relevant to these studies. But I am well aware that I do not possess the knowledge of a specialist on the subject and I thought that I could make better use of this wonderful opportunity of a conversation between two schools of Indology in another way: To tell you about some new researches and to seek your encouragement as well as your useful cautionary suggestions.

Indeed, even if these studies of Sanskrit and Buddhism rightly dominate Indological studies, we are conscious that they do not embrace its entire range. In South India, Dravidian literature, and specifically Tamil literature, more ancient and richer than its sister-literatures, has stood for two thousand years,—or, probably, more,—as a permanent rival of Sanskrit literature. And we mean this not merely as a widely-accepted national literature that obstinately survived or may have even developed side by side with the erudite Sanskrit literature that was imported from the North. Tamil literature by itself contains an enormous quantity of scholarly works and covers the entire cycle of the traditional, classical teachings of the country. In this respect, Tamil stands out from among all other Indian languages, be they Indo-Aryan, Dravidian or of any other group. In no other province of India except in the Tamil country, has the local language been sufficiently rich and varied, even if possessing a splendid body of literature, to permit truly exhaustive studies in any branch of learning: everywhere the complete pandit could find fulfilment only through Sanskrit. This has legitimised, and quite often too, the feeling among some contemporary Tamils that their culture owes nothing to Sanskrit since it is complete in itself.

This feeling is certainly not totally justified. These Tamils could acquire, without learning Sanskrit, the same level of culture as that acquired by those who knew Sanskrit, but then precisely for want of its study, they are unaware that to a great extent their scientific books impart to them the same information as that found in Sanskrit books and by using mostly the same

technical Sanskrit terminology, or at least, by expressing it in a manner that is very similar to that in Sanskrit.

The opposite illusion that the importance of Tamil literature is derived entirely from its having very freely robbed, adapted or imitated Sanskrit literature, was very widespread in the West during a time when it was believed that in India civilisation could have originated only among the peoples who possessed an Indo-Aryan language.

In reality, it is evident today that Tamil literature is partly a take-off on Sanskrit literature and partly altogether original. Taking up the same themes and teachings as contained in Sanskrit literature, it deals with them very thoroughly, leaving the Veda aside which cannot be conceived in any other language except Sanskrit. When it is original it lends classical and traditional forms to the works of the popular, national genius or to the feelings and ideas of its thinkers. And it is not in the beginnings of Tamil literature that Sanskrit influences are most profoundly felt. Almost all the ancient literary works have traces of the knowledge of Sanskrit traditions but they are often very insignificant. It is at a relatively later date that Sanskrit works greatly influenced Tamil literature—an example of it will be taken up shortly—and the fact that it did not get submerged was because this Tamil literature was already in full bloom.

What was more, the Tamil country provided to Sanskrit literature—at a time when Sanskrit studies were most in vogue there—front-ranking authors who drew much of their inspiration either directly or through tradition from the original Tamil literature which they transposed into Sanskrit. Rāmānuja is a case in point.

Hailing from Śrīperumbūdūr to the west of Madras, Rāmānuja became at Śrīraṅgam near Tiruchirapalli, the successor of Ālavandār (Yāmunācārya in Sanskrit). The latter was one of the leaders of the Śrīvaiṣṇava sect and the grandson of Nāthamuni, the founder of the Śrīraṅgam centre, who around 1000 A.D., had piously collected the hymns of the illustrious Tamil saints, the Ālvārs. It is these Ālvārs, their doctrines and their devotion that we shall deal with briefly.

The poem of glorification (Māhātmya) (of Bhāgavatapurāṇa), the great text of Vaiṣṇava devotion, relates a brief story of

Kṛṣṇa-bhakti, the devotion to God Kṛṣṇa (I, 47-49). It is Bhakti herself who speaks. She declares Draviḍa to be her place of birth, Draviḍa being the Tamil country; she grew up in Karṇāṭaka, in Mahārāṣṭra and Gurjara she became old; there she was persecuted; but then she regained her youth in Vṛndāvan. We might be justified in doubting the authenticity of this tale, since being a devotee of Kṛṣṇa, Bhakti should have been born in the region where the epic Mahābhārata as well as Tamil tradition itself situates the descent of Viṣṇu as Kṛṣṇa, in the region where the Mahābhārata War takes place, i.e. in the heart of North and not South India. More precisely in North India among the Śūrasenas of Mathurā, a town neighbouring Vṛndāvana. At the end of the 4th century, Megasthenes was struck here by the cult of a God whom he called Heracles (Arrien, *Inde*, VIII, 5) but who should rather be identified with Kṛṣṇa although he confuses him with a god of the South, father of Pandaia who himself is Śiva according to the legend which corresponds best to the one which he relates and which has been preserved for us in the Tamil *Tiruvilaiyāḍalpurāṇam*. There exist instances where the settings of Northern legends were transferred to the South and on the basis of which we may be inclined to think that the cult of Kṛṣṇa was borrowed by the South from Northern sources even if other indications tend to establish that it got mixed there with the cult of another young god with whom he might have been identified, even as this young god was also identified in Śaivism with Śiva and chiefly with Kumāra.

Nevertheless, we can understand the error made by *Bhāgavatamāhātmya*, since, to my mind there does seem to be an error. In fact, the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* itself reveals to us the basis of the idea that devotion to Kṛṣṇa was born in the Tamil country. According to it, those beings who lived in the ages of the world that were anterior to *Kaliyuga*, the worst of all ages, want to be reborn in it, however ruthless it might be; for it is in *Kaliyuga* and particularly in the Draviḍa country where flow the Tamraparṇī, the Kṛtamālā, the Payasvinī, the Kāverī, the Praticī and the Mahānadi, that men should become the devotees of Vāsudeva thus finding through him their supreme refuge in Nārāyaṇa (*Bhāg. Pur.*, XI, V, 38-40). This, according to Surendranath Dasgupta's indications (*A History of Indian Philosophy*,

III, 63) means that the *Bhāgavata* considers as models of Vaiṣṇava devotion the Tamil saints known as the Āḷvārs, the most important of whom are supposed to have lived, according to Tamil tradition, in the region watered by the rivers enumerated above. The *māhātmya* considers these saints to be the true founders of Vaiṣṇava *bhakti*.

But it should be noted that according to the *Bhāgavata*, it is in *Kaliyuga* that these saints were to be born—therefore after Kṛṣṇa's death, the point from which *Kaliyuga* started (*Viṣṇu-purāṇa*, IV, XXIV, 36; *Bhāg. Pur.* XI, VII, 4). However, other saints devoted to Kṛṣṇa could have been born before them. There is nothing in the information contained in the *Bhāgavata* that compels us to believe that if these Vaiṣṇava saints were the most admirable, they were also the first. We should rather suppose that, even if they gave an exceptional impetus to Kṛṣṇa-bhakti, it is precisely because some others from the North had propagated it among them.

However, there exists a tradition, relatively of a later date, of which the *māhātmya* might not have been ignorant and according to which the first Āḷvārs could have been born in the age that preceded the *Kaliyuga*, the *Dwāparayuga*, and only some of them were born in the beginning of *Kaliyuga*. This tradition that consists in preparing the biographies of the line of these saints' disciples, called *Guruparambarei* (*Guruparam-parā*), disagrees with the *Bhāgavata*, but the disagreement is not so very obvious from its outlook for it depicts the devotion of the saints as not strictly directed towards Kṛṣṇa but to the eternal Nārāyaṇa. The origin of this tradition which gives exact dates of the Āḷvārs (computing them on the basis of speculations of astronomical chronology), seems to be situated between the time of the writing of the eleventh book of the *Bhāgavata*, which does not know it, and the *māhātmya*, which seems to have accepted it. Whatever the case might be, the Āḷvārs' reputation remains totally unaffected. We can judge this from their works as well as from the power and vitality of the religious impetus they provided and which continues to impel people even today.

There are twelve Ālvārs in all, of whom one is a woman, Āṇḍāl. According to the *Guruparambarei*, four must have lived in the Dwāparayuga and they also belonged to the Pallava kingdom: Poygeiyār, Pūdattār, Pēyār and Tirumaḷicei. Pūdattār has in fact a Sanskrit name as well: Bhūdatta, and he must have been from Māmallai, i.e. Mahābalipuram, city of the Pallava king Narasimhavarman I, alias Mahāmalla, which places him actually at 650 A.D.

Three others belong to the Chola kingdom: Tiruppāṇ, Toṇḍāḍippōḍi and Tirumaṅgei. Only one bearing a Sanskrit name, Kulacēgarar, i.e. Kulaśekhara, is from the Cera country. And lastly four, Periyālvār, Āṇḍāl, Nammālvār and Madurakavi are from the Pāṇḍya country.

The works, in verse, which are attributed to them are of very unequal lengths, Nammālvār being by far the most prolific among them. Their language is not the most ancient form of Tamil as it is known to us today but it is closer to it than to modern Tamil. We can characterise it in short as the Tamil of the Early Middle Ages.

Nammālvār is indisputably the most important of these saints and his name means "Our Ālvār", "Our Saint", but it was rather a nickname. His family name was Māraṇ or Kārimāraṇ, Kāri being his father. Several other names or nicknames are attributed to him, the most common one being Saḍagobaṇ, i.e. Śaṭhakopa in Sanskrit, "he who is enraged by falsehood".

Tradition describes him to be born at Teṅgugūr, on the banks of the river Tamraparṇī, a village which came to be known as Ālvārtirunagari, the 'sacred town of the Ālvār'. Dumb in his childhood, he is said to have spent it in a temple seated steadfastly like a yogin under a Tamarind tree. At the age of sixteen, one day speech is said to have suddenly returned to him as the Ālvār Madurakavi was passing by him and, blessed by visions of Viṣṇu, he supposedly sang his first hymns. His work, however, far from being that of an unlettered devotee, does not necessarily contradict the legend, for he could have educated himself by listening to discourses at the temple in the forced introversion of his speechlessness, or he could have in any case educated himself later. His hymns bear testimony to a profound knowledge of Vaiṣṇava tradition and of master-works in Tamil

like the Kuṛaḷ or in Sanskrit, like the *Bhagavadgītā* even though we have no proof that he read it in the Sanskrit original.

We are more or less certain of his time—thanks to some illuminating observations of T.A. Gopinatha Rao (*Sir Subramanya Ayyar Lectures on the History of Śrī-Vaiṣṇavas*, Madras, 1923): about the end of the 8th century in all likelihood. However a very small part of his work has been studied and we cannot vouchsafe that we have it today in the very form that he gave to it.

A gap seems to lie between the Āḷvārs and their school which was successively directed by different masters, *ācāryas*, who were inspired by the former's works. These *ācāryas* collected the hymns of the Āḷvārs sung by devotees and developed around them a prolific literature of exegesis, one part in Tamil, another in Sanskrit and a third section in a special technical jargon, the *Maṇipravāḷam* literally pearl and coral, which is a mixture of Sanskrit and Tamil. The structure of this jargon reveals a tendency of sanskritising the outpourings of the Tamil saints and to reduce their contents to the expression of Vedāntic doctrines. In general, in the texts in *Maṇipravāḷam*, the syntax is Tamil but the conceptual words are in Sanskrit and have a technical Vedāntic meaning. Such texts were useful in adapting the ideas expressed in Tamil stanzas to the taste of a people whose language was Tamil but who were conversant with the Sanskrit Vedāntic philosophy and whose culture was therefore different from that of the more purely Tamil and devoted milieus where these hymns had been composed.

As for the rest, tradition itself underlines the gulf which existed historically between the Āḷvārs and the *ācāryas*. Nāthamuni, the founder of the great school of *ācāryas*, could know only by accident the hymns of Nammāḷvār. He had not been educated at all in a tradition that taught them. It is at Viranārāyaṇapuram, modern Kaṭṭumaṇṇārkōyil, that he probably first heard them being sung by the pilgrims and, struck by their beauty, must have wanted to have the text of these hymns but the pilgrims knew only a part. However, they told him where the poet lived and Nāthamuni proceeded to Āḷvārtirunagari: there he met Parāṅkuśadāsa who is supposed to have been a disciple of Madurakavi, a contemporary of saint Nammāḷvār

and whose visit must have provided the latter,—dumb at the time—, with the determination of singing his hymns. But Parāṅkuśadāsa was obviously not a direct disciple of Madurakavi, or else this Madurakavi was not Nammālvār's contemporary, for Nāthamuni and Parāṅkuśadāsa are supposed to have lived around 1000, whereas we have just seen that Nammālvār and Madurakavi lived probably in the 8th century (besides, it is possible that Nammālvār and Madurakavi are nothing but a duplication of the same person; at least that seems to be the conclusion from an indication given by Kamban the poet in the 12th century).

In any case, the tradition of the hymns was not fully passed on to Parāṅkuśadāsa. What he possessed was never complete. But at the ceaseless chanting of those hymns he knew, Nāthamuni's piety grew more and more intense and, finally, Nammālvār himself must have given him the revelation of his works and those of the other Ālvārs.

In the end we see therefore that it is perhaps futile to mull over the criticism of the chronology of this tradition. It accepts mystic interventions and seems to ignore the intervals of time which could have separated the alleged masters from the alleged disciples. But it bears testimony to the fact that Nāthamuni undertook a laborious rearrangement of this treasure of poignant, venerated, religious songs which had not yet been preserved in a fixed body of sacred scripture.

It is this body of sacred scriptures that Nāthamuni wanted to constitute. He called it the *Nālāyiradivyaappirabandam*, the 'Divine bundle of four thousand'. It is composed, as a matter of fact, of four thousand stanzas of which almost twelve hundred are attributed to Nammālvār alone. We may certainly doubt the authenticity of texts collected through revelation. We might think Nāthamuni to have been deluded into believing that what was actually rising from his unconscious was a communication from outside. On the other hand, we may also doubt that Nāthamuni really believed that he had acquired these hymns of the Ālvārs through revelation. An effort at literary arrangement which has nothing of the mystic inspiration, does in fact occasionally surface. The principal work attributed to Nammālvār, the *Tiruvāymoli* or the 'Utterance of the Sacred Mouth', is

composed of a thousand stanzas, each of which begins with the last word or the preceding one. A text of which all the parts are so interlinked is not just the simple product of a collection of scattered fragments or a composition conceived in a flash in a mystic upsurge in that particular form. At least, it presupposes a work of structuring after a first highly inspired conception. Some would even suspect that it was a fake work of Nāthamuni or blame legend for having wrongly attributed some revelations to him.

In such a case, the hypothesis is often put forth that the compiler fabricated a fake by deliberately attributing his work to a well-known person in order to increase its prestige, and such a hypothesis is quite flattering to the critic who is proud to prove that he has not been duped. But often it is a simplistic hypothesis that ignores all possibility of another explanation, one that could be more probable, of the composition of this presumed forgery. The work may very well be the creation of a well-meaning mind but crossed by complex psychic movements, a mind that interprets its intuitions as revelations and holds to be genuine all that flows out of its system of representation of things. In our particular case, it is unlikely that Nāthamuni's collection was created entirely by him. In his time, texts of fervent devotion had existed for a long time all over the Tamil country, as much among the Śaivas as among the Vaiṣṇavas. We can suppose as tradition would want it that he had gained knowledge of these from the devotees who were familiar with one part and that later he collected them with such an enthusiastic communion with the spirit of these divinely inspired authors that he was able to complement them spontaneously without deviating from their inspiration. And this in no way stopped him from working further, at some later date, in order to add to the texts by means of reordering and retouchings, the regularity of a literary structure to which we referred and which must have been absent in the original composition. The retouchings did not go, however, so far as to wipe out the stylistic differences which mark out the different Ālvāras.

We therefore have the works of the Ālvārs in a restored form, no doubt but not without authenticity. The Sanskritised exegesis which was begun immediately after their collection, confirms

that we are talking about works from another period and another inspiration and not these of the scholastic Vedānta in vogue then. These works could not have been conceived at that time and in that milieu. But by gaining spontaneous acceptance, because of their beauty, in that milieu, these works were taken up at the cost of an interpretation which made of them sacred texts like the Veda and the Upaniṣads, revelations of the Supreme Knowledge.

It was specifically Nammālvār's opera that was looked upon as a Veda and *Tiruvāymoḷi* was taken to be an Upaniṣad.

Nammālvār's works comprise four texts: the *Tiruviruttam*, the *Tiruvāymoḷi*, the *Tiruvācīriyam* and the *Periyatiruvandādi* which are said to be respectively like the *Rgveda*, *Sāmaveda*, *Yajurveda* and *Atharvaveda*. The *Tiruvāymoḷi* would correspond therefore to *Sāmaveda*. This analogy is very thinly justified because of the nature of the songs contained in the 1000 stanzas of the *Tiruvāymoḷi* and it is quite clear that Nammālvār had never intended to imitate the *Sāmaveda*. The theoretical identification with it is secondary: it belongs to a Sanskritising milieu which, when adopting the Tamil work, wished to confer a title of respectability on it of the same kind as the things it venerated. Moreover, the other texts which are extremely short do not have either any real links with the Vedas.

The *Tiruvāymoḷi* was also regarded as an *Upaniṣad* and called *Draṁḍopaniṣad*, the 'Tamil Upaniṣad'. The texts of the *Upaniṣads* are the most important authoritative sources upon which the Vedānta bases itself and from which it derives by way of its commentaries the teachings to which it is specially linked. The *Tiruvāymoḷi* has indeed been seen in this light, in Tamil, in Maṇipravāḷam and in Sanskrit. There are several commentaries that take up and explain it word by word and set out their technical Sanskrit equivalents. These commentaries are named according to the number of the elements of discourse they contain: 6000 for the Āṛāyirappaḍi of Tirukkurugeippirāṇ Pillāṇ, 9000, 18000, 24000 and up to 36000 for others. The names of their authors are quite significant. Pirāṇ Pillāṇ's is preceded by the information that he was from Tirukkurugei, one of the names of Nammālvār's home-town. Another is Periyaparakālaswāmi, 'he whose lord is the Great Transcendent Time', 'great'

(*periya*) being expressed in Tamil, the rest in Sanskrit. Others for instance are Vedāntarāmānujaswāmi, 'he whose lord is the Rāmānuja of the Vedānta', and Śrīraṅgarāmānujaswāmi, 'he whose lord is the Rāmānuja of Śrīraṅgam'. The exegetical work on the *Tiruvāymoli* in Tamil and in Maṇipravāḷam,—which are the languages of these commentaries,—was therefore continued after Rāmānuja by those people themselves who were under the religious patronage of the former.

In Sanskrit an adaptation in verse of *Tiruvāymoli* was done by Vedāntadeśika, an author who may have lived for more than a century, from 1269 to 1371 A.D. This translation is titled *Draṁḍopaniṣattātparyaratnāvalī* and it was the basis simultaneously of a commentary (*vyākhyāna*) and a summary (*sāra*) by Veṅkaṭeśācārya. What developed was therefore a threefold literature about the time of Rāmānuja, on the works of the Ālvārs, and above all on the *Tiruvāymoli*, and even today new commentaries on these works are brought out in modern Tamil.

* * * *

To our mind, the *Tiruvāymoli* seems to merit so much attention. The poet starts by an exhortation to either his heart or to his mind—which is the same thing in Indian thought that situates, like Aristotle, the mind in the heart. He urges it towards the Supreme Being, towards the Supreme Being that he first describes in its essence: all goodness, then in its manifestations as the all-comprehensive Grace which dissolves all troubles, as sovereignty over the Immortals and as the liberating image of adoration offered to the afflicted.

'He who, with nothing above, possesses the sublime Good,
He who by eliminating all disturbance, bestows the grace of
the Goodness of Intelligence,
He who is the Sovereign of the Immortals without exception
After having worshipped his luminous feet which put an end
to suffering, raise thyself, my heart!' (I, 1.1)

But our exegetical scholars of the Vedānta were not content with such a simple interpretation. Some Sanskrit words borrowed very early by Tamil and which figure here, had only to be taken up by them, but, for instance, the Tamil word *nalam* meaning 'goodness' in a very wide sense was explained by them

to be an equivalent of *ānanda* meaning 'beatitude'. It seems very likely that they wanted to find in the definition of Being, *Sat*, implied in the Tamil verses, the two other aspects of the essence of Being according to classical Vedānta: *cit*, the spiritual, and *ānanda*, the beatific. But this shows on their part, a tendency to arbitrarily ascribe to Tamil words meanings which are not attributed to them, which the poet could hardly have had in mind and which were necessary only to discover somehow in the text written by one they revered as a saint, the expression of some familiar doctrines. We see the intrusion into the exegetical framework of a pre-established conviction that the venerated text could have contained the truth only in the garb one was familiar with.

The Vedic commentators made attempts to interpret these works in different ways in accordance with their respective systems of thought. In the same stanza, *madinalam* which we translate as 'Goodness of Intelligence' (*madi*=Sansk. *mati*), has been interpreted by Śrīraṅgarāmānujaswāmi as being 'knowledge in the form of beatitude' (*ānandarūpajñāna*), whereas Vedāntarāmānujaswāmi saw in it 'knowledge and love', for he interpreted *nalam* no more as 'beatitude' but as *sneha*, 'love' or as *bhakti*, 'devotion'.

It would be proper to add before leaving these Sanskritising commentators, of whose methods an example was to be given, that their interpretations are not always arbitrary in this way, that they are mostly useful for understanding the text, often elliptical, and that they are, in any case, accurate testimonies of the state of Vedāntic ideas in the school that gave them currency.

However, as far as we are concerned, Nammālvār himself gives us an adequate idea about his conception of the Supreme Being, for his most important opening stanzas are an invocation to Him. For him, He is above everything supreme and transcendent, He is immanent at once in all things. Knowledge cannot fathom Him but He is known to be impartial, equal, immutable and yet helpful to those who surrender their hearts to Him for He becomes a frail human child to make Himself accessible to His devotees and, above all, He belongs to us, He is 'our Lord',

Emperumān, literally 'our Great one'. What is more he is our very soul:

'When there is no more impurity in the heart, like a blossomed flower, he rises
Unfathomable by spiritual knowledge, unfathomable by sensorial knowledge,
(Always) unchanging, knowing, whole, and Goodness in future, present and past
Peer he has none, (He) my soul, the One without-a-Second.'
(I, 1, 2).

We cannot qualify him, because he transcends all qualification; he clothes himself with all forms and yet he is also the being of that which is formless; it is he that, while being our soul, perceives with our senses, but he does not fall to being an object in the clutches of these senses. He is eternal, infinite, perfectly good and yet we can reach out to him:

When we say: "He is without this, he possesses that, he is difficult for thought (to seize)
Similar to forms on the earth and in space, he is similar to the Formless,
Accompanying the objects of the senses, he is not an object of the senses, he is infinite,
He possesses Goodness. Towards (Him), Alone, we ourselves have indeed reached! (I, 1, 3)

The wonder is that he is Being of such a plenitude that non-being, as far as it exists, exists only by him. There where there is no form, where we see nothing, it does not mean that there is nothing; it means that he is there in the absence of form (if there were nothing, there would not be even non-being):

If we say that he is, he has for his form, these things with forms before us.
[If He who is, is said not to be, it means that they are his absence of form, these things which we designate without form.

In the possession of these qualities which make us say "he is" or "he is not"
 He has two natures, he who extends himself without limit."
 (I, 1, 9)

Here, the saint touches on the philosophical argument and the commentator Pirāṇ Pillāṇ believes that he intended to refute the doctrine of those who say that all is void, that there is no knowledge or object of knowledge or, rather, 'no criteria, no judgment' and no 'thing to judge' (*pramāṇa, prameya*), that there is no Veda, no Lord to be known with the help of the Veda, neither any world of which he is the sovereign (*Ārāyirappaḍi* on *Tiruvāymoḷi* I, 1, 9).

We know who these 'upholders of the void' are; they are the Buddhist *śūnyavādins* who went one step further than the Buddha who had denounced the impermanent nature of compounds; the former deny the impermanent being of a self-existing thing and declared it to be void of all nature, since it is in continuous change. It is not absolutely certain that Nammālvār wanted specifically to contradict them. He could have very well, without any intention of creating a controversy, glorified his God, complete and infinite Being, as embodying at once form and formlessness, being and nothingness; as for its aspects, this nothingness was nothing but a negative form of being and not a non-existence at all unless it did not exist himself. It is of no lesser interest to observe that in a yet undetermined period of time but clearly later than the 11th century, a Tamil author of the Far-South declared the *śūnyavādins* to be his formidable adversaries who should have been attacked by the author he was commenting upon. He himself builds an argument against them which seems to him to correspond with Nammālvār's intentions. He criticises 'the upholder of the void' by reproaching him with denying the existence of the Lord and he asserts that existence and non-existence are two aspects of representing empirical reality, but the omnipresent Lord is in non-existence as he is in existence: "If we say 'He is', He is; if we say 'He is not', He is."

Perhaps 'the upholder of the void' would have accepted this for it is in the forms of the empirical world that he denounced

the void of the self-existent nature, not in absolute Being. Yet, he certainly would not have accepted to bring absolute Being into the realm of forms, those of the sovereign and compassionate Lord. Severe like the ontology of the 'upholder of the void' and as fervent against the criticism of appearances, the Vedāntic doctrine of Śaṅkara too refrained from over-humanising the Absolute by making of it a God in accordance with human conception.

But Nammālvār and his followers, especially Nammālvār in his upsurge of love, rejected this ontological harshness. They did not hesitate in giving too great a value of being to changing phenomena of the external world. Assuming that the Lord is the sole absolute Reality and that he is everywhere, even in the apparent void, Nammālvār held on to these two principles without giving up his belief in his love of God. Since the Lord is the sole Reality, the apparent world in which we live enmeshed is without value; we must detach ourselves from it in order to consecrate to the Lord all the love we can offer to Him. But if the Lord is in everything, even if it be as a common ontological substratum, or as pure existence without an adorable form because it is utterly formless, then all things participate in this all-pervasive reality, and the humblest of existences takes on the infinite glory of the Absolute that is immanent in it. In this way, the Lord can embody the humblest form: he could incarnate himself as a little child, Kṛṣṇa, to come down at the level of appearances, closer to his devotee who knows how to find him there.

Nammālvār cries out:

'Surrender all!

When your soul has completed the surrender

To him, to whom belongs that which surrenders,

Surrender yourself!

'No longer than the flash of lightning does it last

That which we call the bodies and of which the soul is
stable.

Meditate awhile upon that!

"You" and "Yours", destroy them from the roots

And draw near the Lord! For the soul there is

No plenitude that equals this.

(I, II, 1-3)

It is then by abandoning all, by giving up the notions of 'me' and 'mine', these miserable limitations, that we will find the limitless plenitude of the Lord. To surrender all is to free oneself and to give oneself to him, a single word *viḍu* expressing this unique act, simultaneously in its two aspects of renunciation and offering.

Now, the Lord to whom the devotee by giving up his 'I' and his 'mine', surrenders in this way is undoubtedly beyond the limitations of existence and non-existence, being neither one or the other, but in their changing aspects, utterly Himself in his own form, which is infinite:

'That which is neither that which is not nor that which is:
That is its real form.

To this great, limitless good

Ally yourself, having severed all attachment.'

'"Attachment is no more", when this we can utter
the soul has attained liberation.

If, by detesting (even) this you draw near to the Changeless
One,

Break away and seize the Lord.' (I, V, 4-5)

One should, therefore, give up all desire, even if it were that of liberation, for attaining him better. And in these stanzas, we have a simple expression of commonplace notions of all the religions of India. We see expressed what one ordinarily calls Indian pessimism: the world is bad because it is impermanent, subject to vicissitudes; one must detach oneself from it in order to unite with the fundamental stability of Being that is in everything and above all in oneself. In this regard Nammālvār has merely been faithful to his country and his age; he did not need to innovate. However, in a rhythm which unfortunately is lost in the translation, he has expressed these ideas with human passion quite differently moving than the usual, doctrinal sentences. But it is pure passion that is meant since it has only the Supreme Being for goal. What is meant is an impulse which at first sight we can take to be similar to that which leads towards worldly things. But there is a transmutation of the value of this impulse because there is a sublimation of these worldly things, the moment

we see in them the Supreme Being. Indeed, this Supreme Being is immutable and impassive in its real nature but he is seductively splendid, attractive and accessible; his manifestation is redeeming to one who entirely surrenders himself to Him:

‘Without attachment for any part, the Lord
Exists for all.
Being without attachment, in everything that belongs to Him

Surrender yourself!

‘Beholding all splendour, all fortune,

By saying: “Of the Lord

That is all splendour,”

Surrender yourself to it!’

‘Considering these three things which are

Mind, speech and action,

Destroy them and in the Lord

Surrender yourself!’

‘Surrendered to him,

All restrictions

Once renounced,

Think of the moment of leaving the body.’

‘(Of them that are) things of beauty

Through these excellences, in number infinite,

(Of them) whose praise is of boundless plenty

Of the immutable feet of Nārāyaṇa, draw yourself near!’

(I, II, 6-10)

‘He is accessible to the devoted servitors, inaccessible to others.

He is wonderful, our Lord who is difficult to attain and who

loves the Daughter-with-the-flower (his spouse Lakṣmī).

While stealing butter churned abundantly with the beater,

How, tied to the mortar, was he able to cry?’ (I, III, 1)

For Nammālvār, this is the special quality of wonder of the Lord, the contrast which makes his devotion for Him more ardent, He who is inaccessible to common mortals, the divine groom of the goddess of Fortune, cried like a rebuked child because he had stolen butter! This is indeed recounted in a legend of Kṛṣṇa in the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* (X, IX) inspired by the same devotion as that of the Ālvārs to whom it alludes as we have seen. Viṣṇu-

Nārāyaṇa incarnated in the child Kṛṣṇa is brought up among shepherds, hidden among them so that he is not discovered by the tyrant who wished to get him killed from his birth and whom he is destined to kill. He is a child who performs prodigious feats at times but He is also like the others. One day his adopted mother who, had just finished churning butter, had to hurriedly leave the churn to go to remove a pot of boiling milk from the fire. Meanwhile, the little Kṛṣṇa stole the butter and when the farmer's wife returned she scolded him, tied him to a mortar while he would not stop crying. Yet, beneath this child's countenance there is the God of the Universe, there is the Lord. This form of a child will awaken in the heart of the devotee a spontaneous sentiment of affectionate solicitude for the child but the knowledge that this child is the Lord will transport this human feeling onto the sole object that is worthy of all adoration. All said and done, to seek one's liberation from the ordinary human condition, one need not, contrary to what is sometimes said, suppress in oneself all human sentiment so as to coldly meditate on the problem of ontology. It is rather with the heart that one must relate to the Lord in his sublime form with human sentiments that one can concentrate on the adorable human form that he has deigned to take on.

Similarly,—and Kṛṣṇaite devotion finds its justification here—, the young grown-up shepherd Kṛṣṇa will be able to steal the hearts of the shepherdesses; their love for his human form will be justified because of this love's real object, the Lord embodied in this form.

It is love of Kṛṣṇa sublimated in this way that inspired one of the Ālvār saints, Āṇḍāl. Legend says that Āṇḍāl was the adopted daughter of another Ālvār, Periyālvār, who was the officiating priest in a Viṣṇu temple. One day the young Āṇḍāl adorned herself with a garland of flowers that was meant to adorn the divine image. As a consequence, this garland could not be offered anymore. But the god declared that he wanted the garlands first worn by Āṇḍāl who had dedicated herself to him. And the work of Āṇḍāl, the *Tiruppāvei*, a simple collection of thirty stanzas, glitters with this vocation of divine love in human manifestations.

The text of the *Tiruppāvei* is difficult; the commentators disagree in the interpretation of some important words, as in fact it often

happens with ancient Tamil poetry, and there, in addition, the wealth of suggestions and their double meaning, mystic and human, have necessitated an endless exegesis over this short poem. But its basic themes are clear. In the morning Āṇḍāl calls her still-sleeping companions to the worship of the beloved Lord. She describes the practices of renunciation which all of them observed during a certain period and which have purified them. She runs to each one's house, rebukes her nonchalance and urges her on. Then she urges the guardian of the temple to open it. This is followed by an address to Kṛṣṇa and their young sister who is already Kṛṣṇa's spouse. She sings the glories of Kṛṣṇa and she tells him of her impatience. She reproaches the spouse with a touch of human jealousy which adds zest to the force of the feelings of love turned towards the Lord, with not wanting the groom to wake up so that she can keep him longer beside her. She concludes by devoting herself eternally to Kṛṣṇa with all her companions, and evoking, in reference to the chain of thirty strophes, the garland of flowers destined for Kṛṣṇa and which she herself had worn. She calls the sequence of these strophes a 'Tamil garland', *Tamiḷ-mālai*, because 'Tamiḷ' (strictly Tamiḷ) designates the language and means 'suave'.

The *Tiruppāvei* is a poetic masterpiece and perhaps it gives us a glimpse of the path by which we would one day discover the prehistory of the cult of Kṛṣṇa in the Tamil country.

It is on a specific date, in the month of Mārgaḷi (December-January) that Āṇḍāl sings—she states this with the very first words of her first stanza—and she sings after a period of purificatory abstinence. This leads us to think that the young girls she wakes up and takes to the temple of the beloved God perform, along with her, a ritual ceremony on the assigned date and after the necessary preparation. The day is not arbitrarily selected, it is one of festivity and such a festivity is not fixed purely by a mystic improvisation. It can give free vent to the mystic upsurge, it can set it aflame, it is not created by it on a fixed date after a set preliminary rite. It is in answer to an organised cult which had survived and of which the goal was to acquire a husband for young marriageable girls. The *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* (X, XXII, 1) makes of it an occasion of prayer to Kātyāyanī (*Kātyāyanī arcanavrata*) done in the first month of the winter season (*Hemanta*, which is consistent with

the Tamil dating of *Mārgaḷi*) by the shepherdesses asking him to grant them Kṛṣṇa as groom. And if the observance of such a rite is attributed to these shepherdesses, this is so because this rite for the acquisition of a groom existed in general; the shepherdesses practise it specifically to get Kṛṣṇa, it is not their own creation for the occasion. As for the rest, the rite is not inherent in the religion of Kṛṣṇa. The reference made by the *Bhāgavata*, which although is a Kṛṣṇaite work, that the rite is addressed to Kātyāyanī should suffice to warn us. Now, there exists a parallel of the *Tiruppāveī* in the religion of Śiva and of Śakti: the *Tiruvembāveī* by the Śhaivaite saint Māṇikkavācagar, similarly meant to be sung at the festival of *Mārgaḷi* by young girls.

We may now wonder whether this festival does not originate from a cult that was more widespread than that of Kṛṣṇa; that of the young God who appears here as Kṛṣṇa, there as Śiva or as the son of Śiva and Kātyāyanī, Skanda Kumāra. This figure of a young hero is of importance in the religions of the whole of ancient India. This figure reappears, in fact, as Sanatkumāra, the 'Eternally youthful one' of the *Chandogya-Upaniṣad* (VII, I, 1 and XXVI, 2), who in this text is Skanda, but the son of Brahman and not of Śiva, and who, as the protector of the afflicted as well as by his name seems to be simultaneously a prototype of the Brahman Saṅg-kumāra of Pāli Buddhism and of the two Bodhisattvas Avalokiteśvara and Mañjuśrī of Mahāyāna.¹ In the Tamil country, this supremely youthful god was Murugaṇ formerly and eventually thought to be identical with Skanda² and there is a marked preference for devotion to young gods; the much-loved Gaṇeśa, with an elephant's head and the body of a child is called by preference *Piḷḷaiyār*, the 'Child'.

We might therefore be led to believe that in Vaiṣṇavism tender love of the Āḷvārs for the child Kṛṣṇa corresponds to this form of devotion to *Piḷḷaiyār*, the son of Śiva, and above all that ardent love of an Āṇḍāl for the young shepherd who is the soul of the world is an extension of a ritualised devotion which formerly was directed at the youthful God of ancient times. Thus all the piety of the Āḷvārs for the Absolute Being, especially in Nammāḷvār, originated from a religious impulse which was first directed at a personal god. But this piety reconciles the survival of this ancient human impulse with the conviction, derived from the

ontological thinking that the world and human sentiments are nothing beside the Immutable Being. The Ālvārs share this conviction; they know that nothing is valid by itself, that nothing exists but by this Being; but then they see this Being in all and so feel justified in offering to him in the guise of a human manifestation of love, a boundless devotion.

The great thinker, Rāmānuja, held on to these ideas, and illustrated them in his philosophy. He was said to recite Āṇḍāl's Tiruppāvei three times everyday.

What is certain is that the devotional movement born with the Ālvārs, which was given a doctrinal, Vedāntic form by Rāmānuja and which gave way to a scholarly overloading of ideas among the ācāryas, has remained quite alive to this day. Philosophers continue to scrutinize pandits' commentaries and devotees keep the saints' hymns alive by singing them. Nammālvār's *Tiruvāymoli*, along with its principal commentaries in Tamil, in *Maṇipravāḷam*, and in Sanskrit, has been published several times since the end of the 19th century, under the title of *Bhagavadviṣayam*, the 'Domain of the consciousness of the Blessed'. A few years back, the works of the Ālvārs were re-edited with a literal explanation and a commentary, in modern Tamil by Aṇṇaṅgarācāriyar.³ The Tiruppāvei, on its part, is frequently re-edited. In 1952 it was re-edited at least three times.⁴

But this wouldn't yet suffice to show the place that devotion to Ālvārs occupies in the Tamil part of India today. Not only do the Vaiṣṇavas continue to popularise and sing their hymns but a lot of devotees in South India often give their attention, even though they are Śaivas, to all the religious potential which their fervour holds. There were formerly terrible quarrels, in South India, between Śaivas and Vaiṣṇavas. Although all the barriers have not disappeared yet, these quarrels are a thing of the past. Today it is the common beliefs and sentiments that are being enumerated by them. An ideal of ecumenism exists in both Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava groups, comparable to that which is felt in certain catholic and protestant circles and these openly refer to this example. They hope that one day they shall come together in love of the One Being.

Their respective literature already offers them a good number of texts that are so close to one another, as the *Tiruppāvei* and the

Tiruvembāvei, and the latter is included in the larger collection of *Tiruvācagam* of Māṇikkavācagar, which is comparable to the *Tiruvāymoḷi* of Nammālvār. A group of Vaiṣṇavas and Śaivas has recently constituted a *Tiruppāvei Tiruvembāvei Kamitṭi* (committee). This committee published the two texts last year with commentaries and a number of studies by numerous authors. Vaiṣṇava devotion in the Tamil country is not, therefore, dead, accessible only to the philologist through a forgotten literature. Alive like many others, it is based on an ancient literature full of brilliance and endlessly enriched by the tradition which has brought it up to us. It retains its place of a living portion of the extremely rich and variegated culture of present-day India.

NOTES

1. Cf. *Avalokiteśvara, d'après un livre récent, Revue de l'Histoire des Religions*. January-March 1950, pp. 44-58; *Manuel des études indiennes*, t. II, pp. 532, 573, 574.
2. P. Meile in *Manuel des études indiennes*, t. I, pp. 447-449.
3. Kanchipuram, 1944.
4. *Tirouppavai*, original Tamil text translated into French (alongside the Tamil text) by R. Dessigane, Pondicherry, *Cittirattiruppāvei* published by Sri C. Anna Rao, Tirupati. *Tiruvembāvei Tiruppāvei Tirumaṟei āṟaṅga magānāṭṭu malar*, Māyūram (Mayavaram), pp. VII-XV.